

Environmental Health Directors Forum Report

September 20, 2005

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When I was a 4-H leader, we always told the kids to start their public presentations with an attention grabbing statement. If this were my 4-H presentation I would run into the room in my Chicken Little costume yelling "the sky is falling, the sky is falling".

Maybe the sky really isn't falling, but that is the way it seems to many of the Environmental Health Directors in this state. The way things used to be is falling apart all around us. Our forum is being gutted as counties re-organize and senior management teams are fired and environmental health programs are given to planning or community development.... because we fit better with permitting since that is where our money comes from.

In some of the reorganizations, the EHD has been told that he or she can re-apply as a manager or supervisor if they want to. Some of the new organizational charts just don't have a slot for the former EHD to fit into. In some of the splits of EH from "public health" years ago, the person who formerly had a background in public health and has maintained those public health ties over the years is getting ready to retire. Who will be left to remember how it used to be and that Environmental Health is Public Health?

Some say that we are a victim of our own success. We have tied ourselves so closely to septic permits (that's our bacon in many departments) that we are viewed by the outside world as just another permitting operation and belong in the permit assistance center or public works.

Some say it is because our County Commissioners talk & want to keep up with the Jones'... "If it's good enough for "X" county, it should work here too!"

Some say our downfall is that we let go of the RS and allowed individual certifications to be required for several EH program areas with potentially more looming on the horizon. My purpose today is not to blame or finger point, but to be the Chicken Little of our state and sound the warning.

I had the extreme pleasure to address a service organization earlier this summer. The program person did not know me well, but gave one of the best introductions I have ever heard. He told us that he was reading a book recently called "Pompeii". The thing that really struck a chord with him was that the people were so very gifted and ahead of their time. They had constructed an aqueduct to bring them running water and when the volcano came to life and the earthquakes started, the aqueduct broke and they were without water, something they had come to depend on, but took for granted.

He went on to say "It made me think 'what are the things we take for granted'? Safe drinking water, working sewer and trash disposal came to mind. It was all of those things that protect us from disease." And then he said "that is why I invited Debbie Riley from the Health Department here today as our program. She is in charge of protecting us."

He didn't know it, but it was the perfect segway into my talk. I started by explaining how public health got its start in Washington State. I explained how the population of Yakima tripled from 1900 to 1910 and the lack of sanitary measures, outhouses being located next to wells or running straight into the irrigation ditches contributed to the Typhoid outbreak. To break the cycle and protect the public, Dr. Lumsden recommended the formation of a county health organization. He suggested law requiring reporting of all cases of typhoid, safeguarding water supplies, disposal of human waste in a sanitary manner, a campaign to lessen the number of flies and to prevent them from having access to infectious matter and to foods and beverages, and community education in respect to sanitation. The achievements in Yakima led to the development of county health departments in most parts of the country. It all goes back to the knowledge that filth causes disease.

I would like to take a couple of minutes to read something we have used over and over to tell people about environmental health programs, to try to make them understand that we are not just permitting activities, but the very basis for public health. I stole this from Dave Eaton in Walla Walla and then made the changes to make it Mason County's.

A Typical Day of Environmental Health (EH 101)

How many of you have used an Environmental Health service within the last month? The last week? The past day? You are using Environmental Health services all the time without knowing it. I've put together an example of what I mean:

- ❑ **Shower in the morning** – If your family lives outside the city or other public sewer system boundaries, wastewater is treated and disposed of by way of a septic tank and drainfield system designed and inspected by the local health department. The septic system meets stringent state standards and is designed, operated and maintained to function properly to protect drinking water supplies and surface water.
- ❑ **Family has breakfast** – Frozen juice concentrate is mixed with tap water. If the water is from a community water system, the water quality is checked regularly by the health department. If the family has a private individual well, the local health department has a certified lab that is capable of testing the well water for harmful bacteria and nitrates. The food for breakfast is purchased at the local grocery store, which is permitted and inspected by the local health department.
- ❑ **Garbage pickup day** – Before leaving for work, the garbage can is taken to the street for collection. The garbage is taken to the transfer station, which is inspected by the local health department. Regulations address all aspects of monitoring the closed landfill and the transfer station including groundwater monitoring and nuisance abatement. The local health department also works with property owners and takes necessary action to get illegal dumping cleaned up.
- ❑ **Drop children off at school** – Schools must operate in compliance with state board of health regulations, which govern sanitation, playground safety, food safety, air quality and school construction. The local health department conducts routine food inspections and responds to complaints.
- ❑ **Lunch with friends at a local restaurant** – food service establishments are inspected and permitted by the local health department for compliance with sanitation and food handling standards. The local health department contracts with WSU Cooperative Extension to provide food handler training classes for food workers.
- ❑ **Co-worker tells you about a meth lab that was busted in their neighborhood** – after the bust, the local health department posts warning signs on the home and works with the property owner to assure the house is cleaned up before it is reoccupied or sold.
- ❑ **Your son calls you at work** – While walking home from school he was bitten by a dog. Law enforcement or the hospital emergency room notifies the local health department. The local health department coordinates with local law enforcement authorities and assures that the dog is quarantined and observed for ten days as required by regulations.

- ❑ **Your daughter calls you at work** – She reminds you to pick her up at the high school at 6:00 PM after her swim team practice. The swimming pool is permitted and inspected by the local health department.
- ❑ **Home by 6:30** – just in time to take the kids to the Mason County Fair. Your family eats at several of the food booths. Each booth is required to obtain a temporary food service permit issued by the local health department. Booths are also inspected by local health department sanitarians.
- ❑ **While watching the late news** – You learn of a food borne illness outbreak involving one of the local restaurants. The local health department is working overtime investigating the cause and source of the outbreak and to prevent additional illness. Residents are urged to phone the local health department for reliable information or if they have eaten at the restaurant recently and have become ill.

Another news story tells how the local health department is involved with emergency and bioterrorism planning.

A third story explains that West Nile Virus (WNV) is has been detected in a bird and two mosquito pools in the State and that mosquito control measures are still needed until the first frost arrives. Citizens are urged to report dead crows and raptors to the local health department since dead birds may be an early warning of WNV in the community.

Finally to bed – You'll sleep better knowing that Public Health is always working for a safer and healthier Mason County.

To sum up, I just want to say to you administrators, health officers, nursing directors and friends of public health: Environmental Health is Public Health, go home and fight to keep your health department together. Educate your boards and citizens. Promote cooperation between nursing and environmental health programs. Remind them that we need to work together to protect the public health because we are all working for a safer and healthier Washington.

Thank you for listening.